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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Letter dated 8 September 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the General Assembly

I have the honour to forward herewith the summary of a retreat on strengthening the General Assembly, which brought together a group of Permanent Representatives on 16 and 17 June 2011 in Tarrytown, New York (see annex). The meeting was organized by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations in close cooperation with the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

The retreat was attended by the President of the General Assembly, Joseph Deiss, as well as the President of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, Srgjan Kerim, and the President-elect of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser.

Participants in the seminar discussed the role and status of the General Assembly, and efforts at the revitalization of its work and working methods, with the objective of defining elements towards a stronger Assembly.

Specifically, participants considered tangible measures that could be taken towards this objective and agreed that these could be useful contributions to the ongoing discussions on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Furthermore, the retreat provided an opportunity to allow incoming General Committee members to be familiarized with the working methods of the General Assembly.

The attached report has been prepared under the Chatham House rules.

I would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly under agenda item 118.

(*Signed*) Jarmo **Viinanen**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations

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Annex to the letter dated 8 September 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the General Assembly

Towards a stronger General Assembly: high-level retreat, 16 and 17 June 2011, Tarrytown, New York

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

The Permanent Mission of Finland organized a retreat entitled "Towards a stronger General Assembly" on 16 and 17 June 2011 at Tarrytown, New York, with the aim of contributing to the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly. The retreat, which brought together incoming members of the General Committee at the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly with the Presidents of the sixty-fifth and sixty-second sessions, the President-elect of the sixty-sixth session, a Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly at the sixty-fifth session, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and other senior Secretariat officials, consisted of a keynote dinner address followed by a question-and-answer session on 16 June, and presentations followed by an interactive exchange of views on the working methods of the General Assembly on the morning of 17 June.

Thursday, 16 June

Keynote address

A keynote address was delivered by the President of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, Srgjan Kerim, at a dinner held on the evening of 16 June.

In his thought-provoking address, Mr. Kerim laid out a vision for the reform of the United Nations based on two basic preconditions, namely reaching agreement among the entire membership on the notion and scope of the reform process and, secondly, organizing a review conference on the Charter of the United Nations in accordance with its Article 109. Noting that the United Nations had proven indispensable as a tool of humanity during the 66 years of its existence, President Kerim stressed the need for a profound discussion of the role of the Organization's principal organs, the balance among them and their composition. As the General Assembly was the only universal body, and the Security Council the most powerful one, a more substantive interaction and cooperation was required between them, which could be provided, inter alia, through regular discussions between the Presidents of the Security Council and the General Assembly on issues agreed to in prior consultations.

With regard to the General Assembly, President Kerim formulated 10 points. First, he strongly argued against the use of the term "revitalization", which he suggested sounded cynical, and instead proposed using "reform" as a more accurate and reflective description of what was needed. Secondly, the General Assembly needed to become better at practicing and communicating its functions and powers

as stipulated in the Charter. Third, the traditional division of the Assembly's work into a main and resumed part of the session had ceased to reflect reality, and the Assembly should therefore be meeting throughout the year instead. Fourth, the agenda should be divided into two parts, one dealing with matters of global relevance and the other with issues related to the work of the subsidiary organs. Fifth, it should be contemplated to integrate the work of the Main Committees directly into that of the plenary, except for the Fifth and Sixth Committees, which should continue to exist as separate organs. Sixth, a procedural resolution, adopted once per year, should clarify the reporting requirements for the Secretary-General and should include a provision for quarterly briefings of the General Assembly. Seventh, the role of the General Committee should be revised and enhanced to make it more operational and involved in the coordination of the activities of the General Assembly. Eighth, participation of other stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations, business representatives and scientists, should be formally integrated in the work of the Assembly. Ninth, the Assembly's role and involvement in electing its President and in the appointment of the Secretary-General needed to be improved. The tenth point aimed at strengthening the Office of the President of the General Assembly, including in the areas of protocol, media, staffing and funding, which should be covered in full by the United Nations regular budget.

Friday, 17 June

Opening remarks by the President of the General Assembly

The morning session on Friday, 17 June, began with reflections by the President of the General Assembly, Joseph Deiss, on the work of the Assembly. In his presentation, the President noted the General Assembly's role and authority on global matters of concern as reaffirmed by Member States in resolution 65/94 on global governance. It was necessary to elevate the debate on strengthening the Assembly accordingly. Noting the primary vision of the Assembly as serving as guardian of the Charter, President Deiss also noted the Assembly's moral power vis-à-vis the world. The General Assembly should not be expected to do everything, but it should harness the unique legitimacy at its disposal and balance the other institutions. The Assembly's convening power should be bolstered by focusing its debates on the most relevant topics of the day. While the General Assembly should not be expected to write history each and every day, it had proven its capacity to do so in the past, as when it adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The President called for the Assembly to strengthen bridges to other principal organs, specialized agencies, outside organizations, civil society and others and noted with pride that the Assembly was the only parliament where a non-member could take the floor and that that should be encouraged. Citing the relationship with the other principal organs, especially the Security Council, the President noted that he had held regular meetings with each President of the Council during his presidency so far. He also noted that the Assembly had a responsibility to hold accountable the Council's non-permanent members that were elected by the Assembly. The General Assembly also enabled those Members that were not represented in the Council to air their views on issues discussed by the Security Council. Another important element regarding the Assembly's role and authority, according to President Deiss, lay in its outreach to external bodies, such as the G20, or other stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations and civil society.

Commenting on the means available to the Office of the President, the President emphasized the importance of adequate availability of funds, to enable the incumbent, inter alia, to fully harness the representational aspect of the office. In that regard, some provisions concerning protocol had remained unrealized over the years. On the debates taking place in the Assembly, President Deiss hoped they could become more interactive, bearing in mind the institution's intergovernmental character, including through the closer personal involvement of the Permanent Representatives. One of the most important tools available to the President was the convening of thematic debates. The President also emphasized the need for better implementation of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly. In conclusion, he emphasized the importance of the Office of the President consisting of a team representative of the wider membership and noted the potential for improving the transition period from one President to the next.

Presentation of General Assembly handbook

The President's opening remarks were followed by a presentation by the Permanent Representative of Switzerland, Paul Seger, of a handbook on the General Assembly which was a practical guide to the work of the Assembly and would be published by Switzerland shortly. The motivation for preparing the guide had come from resolution 60/286, specifically paragraph 9 by which the Assembly had requested the President of the General Assembly at the end of his/her tenure to provide an informal, short report on best practices and lessons learned to his/her successor. Relevant practical information had been collected accordingly and would be listed in the publication, which would be distributed to all Member States. Ambassador Seger also underlined that the information contained in the handbook had not only been culled from printed sources but gleaned from unwritten practice and oral tradition, sources of institutional memory that, had they not been thus captured, might indeed have been lost. The Ambassador hoped that the handbook would be of use not only to future Presidents and their teams, but also to new delegates and committee members, Secretariat staff and civil society.

Address by the President-elect

The Permanent Representative of Qatar, Nasser Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the President-elect of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly, provided an overview of his ideas on how to strengthen the work of the General Assembly during the forthcoming session. In his presentation, Ambassador Al-Nasser noted that the effectiveness of the General Assembly and its work were directly linked to its ability to forge consensus on major issues of the day, noting that the process of revitalizing the General Assembly should be a top priority. Other substantive issues that he flagged as having top priority for him included the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and environmental action. The latter took on particular importance in light of the forthcoming Rio+20 Conference. The Ambassador realized, in regard to those and other issues, that leadership provided by the President of the General Assembly had been and would be crucial. It was therefore important that the Fifth Committee support strengthening the Office of the President of the General Assembly. It was also important that coordination with the different principal organs, especially the Security Council, be enhanced. Other elements included the shortening of statements in the General Assembly and the streamlining of its agenda. The option of making proceedings of the Assembly

paperless should be seriously considered, and the practice of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations could serve as a model in that regard. Also, the website of the General Assembly could be further improved. The Ambassador concluded by noting that the relationship between the President-elect and the membership of the Assembly should be an active one to ensure successful preparation of the forthcoming session.

Remarks by the Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly

The Permanent Representative of Lithuania, Dalius Čekuolis, briefly commented, in his capacity as Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, on a number of issues and activities of the Working Group that related directly to those that had been raised so far, for the purpose of both linking the efforts of the Working Group to the topics at hand and providing an overview for those who might be directly involved in the work of the Assembly or its subsidiary bodies in the course of the forthcoming session.

The Ambassador indicated his own initial misgivings about the term "revitalization", as for him the Assembly was already a vital United Nations organ. The purpose of the Working Group, as he saw it, was more about organizing a sustained effort to make the General Assembly as efficient and effective as possible. That was not necessarily an easy task, as the Working Group had been in existence for many years and some saw it as a "guardian process" or a "steam release valve".

While some might argue that there had been little movement on concrete actions and "Member State implementation", he emphasized that progress was being made on both working methods and on coordination with other bodies, and suggested that pushing further forward on those fronts could help ensure the greater presence and participation at the Permanent Representative level. Two specific initiatives highlighted by the Ambassador were the briefings given to the Working Group by the Chair of the Second Committee, the Permanent Representative of Mongolia, on improvements made in its working methods, and by the Chair of the Security Council's Informal Working Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Issues, the Permanent Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on its practices and innovations.

Discussion

In response to the initial remarks, a number of comments and questions were raised. One speaker stressed the importance of "advocacy" and also wondered what the General Committee could do to be of greater support to the President and his team. Another expressed concern over the extent to which, in the context of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Revitalization, so much effort and focus had been devoted to questions of working methods, when the status of the General Assembly among organs ought to be promoted instead.

On advocacy, the President of the General Assembly responded that that was a question he asked each day, i.e., how best to make the Assembly's work more visible and effective. He also noted that the General Assembly was not generally perceived as a parliament and that it was important that the sovereignty of Member States be respected and reflected in that regard. At the same time, the more the

membership thought about global governance, the more it would realize that many of the international community's problems could not be solved at the country level.

Making an analogy to the country level, however, the President did take the opportunity to highlight the question of consensus as perceived and practised in the United Nations, commenting that, in his home country of Switzerland, consensus was considered to be a strong majority and that, because of that, action could not be blocked as easily as it was here.

Because of its "very political nature" and its "infrequent meetings", the President was not sanguine about an increase in the role of the General Committee. Instead, he first emphasized the importance of assistance and support received from the Secretariat. Then he heavily emphasized that, to his mind, what really distinguished the United Nations was the Charter, which he described as a "huge asset for humanity" in addressing the challenges before it.

Secretariat presentations

The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, Shaaban M. Shaaban, briefed the retreat on various organizational aspects of the work of the General Assembly. Specifically, Mr. Shaaban pointed to the number of meetings in the Assembly's schedule, both formal and informal, which over recent years had continually increased. That was due in part to the increased number of thematic debates, the number of high-level meetings and the length of the Assembly's agenda. The mandate for thematic debates came from resolution 59/313, by which the Assembly had decided to convene and organize major thematic debates in order to establish broad international understanding on current substantive issues of importance to Member States. Presidents of the General Assembly had considered this to be an important tool at their disposal to give shape to their presidencies and to focus the Assembly's deliberations. Naturally, each thematic debate, which might include high-level participation, required individual preparation. Recurrent challenges, from an organizational perspective, included how to deal with the number of speakers who would like to take the floor but could not be accommodated because of time limitations. Also, with a view to promoting interactive exchange, Member States were regularly encouraged to have their written statements circulated in the room so as to allow for their oral interventions to be as interactive as possible.

Secondly, recent years had seen a veritable proliferation of the number of high-level meetings, particularly during September and around the time of the general debate. That appeared to be due in part to the fact that various tracks of negotiations ran in parallel in the different Main Committees as well as in the plenary. It also seemed to reflect the understandable desire of various parts of the United Nations system to be proactive in taking initiatives that would ultimately lead to the organization of a high-level meeting. One consequence of multiple high-level meetings, in addition to their budgetary impact, however, was the additional strain on Member States, who had to balance all of the demands that high-level attendance in New York entailed. In that context, Mr. Shaaban noted the long-emphasized priority given by Member States to the importance of the general debate and the need to preserve its sanctity, as stipulated in resolution 57/301.

In concluding, the Under-Secretary-General referred to the General Assembly's agenda, which currently included 162 items. He recalled that Member

States had decided to arrange the Assembly's agenda under thematic headings for the purpose of giving a sense of structure to its work, achieving a better presentation of the issues and challenges it dealt with and making its work more accessible, as outlined in resolution 58/316. At the same time, there had been continuous calls for streamlining the agenda by eliminating items, clustering them or considering them on a biennial or triennial basis. On the other hand, even though the call for streamlining the agenda and making it more accessible was frequently repeated, only very few concrete measures had been taken by the General Assembly in recent years.

Following the presentation by Under-Secretary-General Shaaban, the Director of the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division, Ion Botnaru, briefed the group on the current status of the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly and highlighted a number of issues of direct practical relevance.

At the outset, Mr. Botnaru provided an overview of the services and support provided by the Division, emphasizing its role as retainer of institutional memory of the Assembly's working methods and practices, including also for the Office of the President of the General Assembly. He then outlined a number of ideas that could have a positive impact on the work of the Assembly and that could be further considered by Member States, such as the possibility of drawing to determine the list of speakers for the general debate. Another point he raised was the potential for improving the Assembly's website to make it even more user-friendly and to support Member States in their daily work, based on their requirements. Another improvement that was often raised, but on which no tangible progress had materialized so far, concerned the method of balloting in the Assembly. Mr. Botnaru underscored that any steps to be taken in that regard by the Secretariat would require a clear mandate from the General Assembly. Finally, the General Committee could meet more frequently to exchange views on current issues pertaining to procedural matters before the Assembly. For example, the Division was often faced with a situation where sponsors of resolutions, who pursuant to the rules of procedure could not explain their vote when action was being taken on their proposal, would ask for the floor, which often led to delegations having to take the floor on a "point of order" to convey their statement. That was just one example of a question pertaining to the rules of procedure which Member States might wish to consider in the future. Another one concerned current practice followed in the plenary whereby the recommendations of the Main Committees were considered one by one. One alternative that could be contemplated, with a view to time efficiency, was for the Assembly to approve all those draft resolutions that the respective Committee had adopted without a vote in one decision, unless a vote was specifically being requested at the plenary stage. In concluding, Mr. Botnaru noted that should the General Committee decide to enhance its role as repository of institutional memory, the Secretariat was always ready to assist in that effort.

Discussion

In the course of the ensuing discussions among participants, many thought-provoking questions were raised and speakers engaged in an interactive exchange of views covering the gamut of issues covered in the retreat.

Questions related to the modalities of influencing Member States, individually and collectively, to be more engaged in the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly were raised. Further, noting the importance of political advocacy, participants wished to know specifically what General Committee members in particular could do to contribute to the strengthening of the work of the Assembly. One view was that the General Committee, in theory, should be meeting throughout the session but it was noted that that was not currently the case and that efforts would need to be undertaken to ensure more regular meetings in the future. It was also acknowledged that Member States themselves bore primary responsibility for making the Assembly's work more vital and energetic, inter alia by allowing meetings to start on time and by respecting timelines.

Pointing to the need for increasing the visibility of the work of the General Assembly to the outside world, the importance of reaching out to students was highlighted, in particular, and the view was expressed that the work of both the President and the General Assembly itself should be better publicized.

On the idea of holding two major thematic debates in the course of each session, the question was put whether the cost burden this entailed might have an adverse impact on the ability of smaller delegations to participate effectively in these deliberations.

The role of the modernization of technology was raised in the context of the General Assembly's working methods, and participants asked to what extent improvements could be expected to result from the conclusion of the capital master plan. Reference was made in particular to conference facilities at other duty stations and whether best practices could be followed better in the General Assembly in New York, such as the instalment of screens on delegations' desks. It was also noted that no progress had been made so far regarding modernizing and optimizing the balloting technology employed in the General Assembly Hall.

Relevant experience from the Main Committees was shared, including the enhanced use of websites, for instance for the purpose of submitting and sponsoring draft resolutions. The idea of installing a virtual "chat room" for the General Assembly was raised, and the importance of including non-governmental organizations in Assembly deliberations stressed.

Several speakers underscored the need to streamline the agenda, which they argued had become overburdened and unwieldy over time. The reporting requirements of the Secretariat should similarly be reviewed, with the objective of optimizing input into the intergovernmental deliberations.

Wrap up and closing remarks

In concluding remarks, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland thanked all participants for their contributions to an extremely stimulating and useful exchange of views. He identified five points that had crystallized in the course of the debate. First, the Assembly's agenda could be further streamlined to better focus the debates of Member States. Secondly, several participants had seized upon the idea of organizing two high-level debates during a General Assembly session, one in autumn and one in the summer. Third, it had been widely recognized that the role of the General Committee was not fully harnessed and that the 21 Vice-Presidents could be better utilized in reaching out to the wider membership. Fourth,

it was agreed among participants that there was a great potential for better making use of modern technology, such as enabling Net-based functions and installing screens on each delegation's desk. Such technology could also be better used in the Assembly's outreach efforts to the wider world. Fifth, the General Assembly handbook presented during the retreat was a clear step towards strengthening institutional memory. Before concluding the retreat, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland indicated that a similar seminar would be held the following year to institutionalize the practice of bringing together the incoming General Committee members.

Enclosure

List of participants

H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss
President of the General Assembly

H.E. Mr. Ahmad Allam-mi
Permanent Representative of Chad

H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser
President-elect of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly

Mr. Ion Botnaru
Director, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division

H.E. Mr. Dalius Čekuolis
Permanent Representative of Lithuania

H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim
President of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly

H.E. Mr. Miloš Koterec
Permanent Representative of Slovakia

H.E. Mr. Thomas Mayr-Harting
Permanent Representative of Austria

H.E. Mrs. Simona Mirela Miculescu
Permanent Representative of Romania

H.E. Mr. Park In-Kook
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea

H.E. Mr. Gary Francis Quinlan
Permanent Representative of Australia

H.E. Mr. Armin Ritz
Chef de Cabinet, Office of the President of the General Assembly

H.E. Mr. Paul Seger
Permanent Representative of Switzerland

H.E. Mr. Shaaban Muhammed Shaaban
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management

H.E. Mr. Thomas Adoumasse
Deputy Permanent Representative of Benin

H.E. Mr. Eshagh Al Habib
Deputy Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran

H.E. Ms. Heidi Schroderus-Fox,
Head of Policy Issues, Office of the President of the General Assembly

Ms. Rita Kazragiene
Deputy Permanent Representative of Lithuania

Mr. Janne Taalas
Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland

Mr. Saijin Zhang
Chief, General Assembly Affairs Branch,

Mrs. Rofina Tsingo Chikava
Deputy Permanent Representative of Zimbabwe

Mr. Attila Zimonyi
Deputy Permanent Representative of Hungary

Mr. Tariq Ali Faraj H. Al-Ansari
Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Qatar

Mr. Kenji Nakano
Senior Political Affairs Officer, General Assembly Affairs Branch

Mr. Ahmed Azizi
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Ms. Nicole Ruder
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Political Affairs Officer, Office of the Director,
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